THE SKY PILOT TO THE LUMBERJACKS

WHERE a Missionary Must Be First a Man, Afterward a Preacher. "Higgins" Has a Congregation of 30,000 in 250 Camps.

The Sky Pilot, His Church and His Audience

PASTOR of the "Parish of the Pines" is the Rev. Francis E. Higgins, an evangel, who ministers to the spiritual and often the temporal wants of a congregation of 30,000, and yet has no church. He is the original of Norman Duncan's stories of the Northwest. His followers are lumberjacks and his parish comprises the vast timber lands of the Northwest, which he transverses with a dog drawn sledge. How he preaches in the language of the woods and how he practises muscular Christianity are told here.

"IF I were getting ready for my work again," said the Rev. Francis E. Higgins, "I would take lessons in boxing." He smiled a good humored smile from a pair of Irish-blue eyes. "The man that goes into the woods to preach to men has to be a man first and a preacher afterward."

He is Higgins, just plain Higgins, to the saloon keepers he has put out of business and the councils he has awakened to their duty out in the lumbering towns of the Great Lakes. But to his parishioners, the men who cut the timber, he is "the Pilot." He has no church. His sermons are preached in the low, dimly lighted bunk house of the camp, with its double tier of straw filled bunks and its red hot stove around which hang the half dry "mackinaws" and mittens of the men. And with a blanket covered barrel for his pulpit the Pilot preaches in the lingo of his hearers. Perhaps it is the story of the Prodigal Son.

"He got tired of living at home with the old man, boys, so he packed his turkey and went out to blow his stake. Where did he land? You know. He ended in the snake room. And there the old man found him, and took him home and sobered him up."

Committees, officials and public sentiment are conserving the forests. Higgins, single handed, is conserving the lumberjacks. He has no church, but he has a congregation of 30,000 Irish, Scotch, French-Canadian, American—they wait for him.

The missionary travels all over the timber region of Minnesota with his team of dogs. Although Higgins is a man who weighs more than two hundred pounds, his beautiful team of dogs carried him forty miles, to Little Fork, in six and one-half hours. When there is a crust on the snow he can travel anywhere in the open timber, regardless of roads. He says his team is worth $500 to him.

Sometimes he is caught out at night and is obliged to camp in the woods. He has a small tent and builds a fire in it, cuts boughs and fixes a bed on the snow, and with a dog on each side of him he sleeps comfortably and with a conscious security. He feeds the dogs but once a day—at night. He generally shoots a rabbit or two during the day. Sometimes he cooks a part of one for himself and gives the dogs all they can eat of the raw meat.

Higgins is the first preacher that has found his way to this forest, where there is no person excepting the sturdy pioneer that is blazing the way for civilization and progress, and the first meeting was held in the cabin of the oldest pioneer, a man who has not had a sight of civilization for more than ten years. There were twenty homesteaders present at the meeting, and to their credit be it said that reverently they sat and quietly they listened to the first spiritual message.

His territory extends from Duluth 200 miles west, south to Brainerd and north to the Rainy River. There are 250 camps in this region.

A lumber camp has much the same appearance as a very small and rough looking village. The foreman is the arbiter of almost life and death, and beyond his "say so" there is no court of appeal. The activities of the camp begin with the first streak of dawn, when the cook begins to prepare the morning meal, which consists chiefly of beans, porridge and hot tea, sweetened with molasses. After breakfast the men are assigned to their day's work, the hewers often going three or four miles from the camp. The teamsters get ready to haul the first logs to the railroad or the river. The teams are often composed of four to six horses to drag the monster logs, lashed together with heavy chains, over the rough places and up the grades.

The men work until sundown. Then they hasten back to camp to prepare for supper, the principal meal of the day. It usually consists of potatoes, cream of tartar biscuit, sour dough bread, boiled beef or some sort of game and tea. After supper the men amuse themselves as best they can; some fall asleep, others play cards or tell stories. Since the missionary has entered the field the men also have books to read.

Going from Camp to Camp

Photo by Hakkerup

When the camp breaks in the spring and the "boys" go to town in search of their own ruin in the guise of the only pleasures they know, they find him waiting for them, watching over them still.

"Who's that?" asked a stranger in one of the old time saloons, seeing him take a drunken boy by the throat and carry him out bodily.

"That's Higgins," replied a man in spiked boots and mackinaw. "His job's keeping us boys out of hell, and he's the only man on the job."

There is no cant or "grand standing" about his work. Following his congregation into the haunts of their temptations is simply a part of his duty as he sees it. And the men recognize it as such. It does not occur to them that they are witnessing an application of practical Christianity such as the modern world seldom sees.

Out of the Snake Rooms.

It is easy to listen to the tale of the good Samaritan if you see him exemplified before you in the person of the man who is telling the story. And many a member of his congregations the Pilot has with his own hands taken out of the snake room, the filthy dens where they are thrown to snore and groan and shriek themselves back to consciousness after the adulterated whiskey of "The Lumberman's Home" or "Jake's Place."

And if during the process of washing them up or nursing them through pneumonia the Pilot has "rubbed it into them," it is his recognized right so to do. He has proved that he means what he says.

The friend who would save a man in places where they give him "doped" whiskey, take his winter wages of $400 in a night and cast him out in the morning without a cent, has need of a strong right arm. And the Pilot does not hesitate to use his.

"A young fellow, named Pat Murray, a likely lad, asked me to look out for him one spring," he said, "but he'd been in town a whole day before I heard of it. Then I found him in Jake Hart's place, one of the worst. Just as I came in the door he put a double handful of bills down on the bar. 'Here, bungswatter,' he said, 'set up the house.'

"The men crowded up for their drinks, and the barkeeper took a few bills off the pile. But I knew as soon as Pat's back was turned the whole pile would go into the till.

"'My turn, Pat,' I said, putting my hand over it. 'I'll take this.'

"'Look here, Higgins,' said the barkeeper, 'what do you mean by butting in this way?'

"'This is my job, and I'm going to see it through,' I said. He struck at me, but couldn't reach me; so he came over the bar with a spring. But before he landed I caught him on the point of the jaw, and while he was still stretched out on the floor I got Pat out of the place. When he was on the train for Wisconsin I sent a draft for his money to his old mother.

"It used to be easier. When they logged by water the camps were far away from the towns, and the boys were safe for the winter. They could only have a log fall on them, or get cut in two by a saw, or something like that, all in the day's work. But now they log by rail, and the towns spring up about the camps like leeches. That's what they are, leeches, made up of saloons and gambling hells and worse. What do they give a boy who's worked from dark to dark six days a week? Nothing but what his money will buy, bad liquor, a crooked game and women that cities have tired of. It isn't only one big spree in the spring now. It's a little one every Sunday. The boss has to send a wagon on Monday to gather his men out of the snake rooms.

"Not that all woodsmen drink. Some of the older ones are sober, steady men, with families. But the young fellows don't know anything else, though they are quick enough to take it when it comes their way. They don't get a show.

"I know, because I have worked in the woods myself. I grew up on a frontier farm in Canada, hunting with bow and arrow with the Indian boys, and working in the woods with my father. I saved what little money I earned, and when I was twenty went to Toronto for my first schooling. Five years later I was through the High School and in my first little church out in Barnum, Minn.

"One day I was standing on a log in the river, watching the men breaking the log jam. The logs were piled up twenty feet high, and the men were working right in the face of the jam, when suddenly they got the key log and the jam gave way. We all had to jump for our lives, and so the men found out who I was. While we were sitting on the bank, watching the logs go down, all smooth and quiet, the men asked me to preach to them, and I did.

"'Boys,' I said, 'you're on the merry-go-round. You work all winter in the woods, and come down in the spring and blow your money. You go back on the drive, and blow your money. You go into the mills, and blow your money. Then you go back to the woods, and blow your money. What does it get you? Nothing but the snake room. It goes to buy diamonds for other men's wives. Jake Sharkey's wife says she can have all she wants. Her husband's got a thousand men working for him in the woods! She meant you, boys. Are you going to do it again after this drive?

"'You can't stop? I know you can't. But the grace of God in your hearts can help you to stop, and it's the only thing that can.' And then we prayed and sang.

"'Come out to the camp and talk to us, Parson,' one of them said when we were shaking hands. 'Nobody wastes much time talking to us.'

"And so I went. And I told them the truth as we all knew it. I didn't have to preach hell to them. They knew that. They'd seen it in the snake rooms. The love of God was harder for men who'd always had to pay for what they got to understand. But at last some of them began to see what I meant.

"One night, just as I was starting home, a man named John Sornberger came to me with tears running down his face.

Willing to Go to Jail.

"'My God!' he says, 'if you know anything to help me tell me about it.' We went to an empty shack and I talked to him and prayed with him all night. He told me an awful story of a life of thievery and crime. Once he had hit a man with a jug and left him for dead, and spent a year in hiding. At the end of that time he found that the man had got well, so he went back. He was a 'dough puncher,' a cook, and a good one, but such a drunkard and thief that he couldn't keep a job. He was a kind of tramp, going from camp to camp, staying a few days, and then getting thrown out for drinking or stealing.

"'Well John,' I said, 'the first thing is to get you straight with the authorities.' He was willing to go to jail, but the Sheriff didn't send him there when I promised to keep my eye on him.

"I got him a job in another camp, and he stuck to it and paid up all that he could of his back debts.

"Two years later he got a job in the summer cooking for a railroad construction crew. A farmer's daughter brought them milk every morning, and pretty soon John came to me to know if I thought he might marry her. I found she knew the story of his life and had forgiven it, and so after a time I married them. Three years later he became my first missionary.

"The sum of $200 means a missionary to us in the woods, for the boys furnish the rest of the money themselves. That's why I have left my work and come out to tell about their needs. No one man can reach them all. This year I am going to send a man into Northern Michigan, where the conservation people would tell you that the timber is all cut, but where there are ten thousand men still at work.

"I didn't ask the boys for any money, because I knew that everybody who ever went near the camps did that. At first they kept on their hats and smoked while I was talking, and finally one night I wore my hat myself. When I got up I said, 'Boys, this is the only church we've got. Let's make it as good a one as we can.' I took off my hat. And every hat came off.

"Another time a big Frenchman was grinding his axe while I was talking. 'The boys have asked me to come out here and talk to them,' I said to him, 'and I'll be glad if you'll wait a few minutes to grind that axe.'

"He went right on and began to whistle. Finally Mike O'Leary, the blacksmith, stepped up to him, took him by the shoulder and threw him out of the door. 'I'm roadmonkeying for the Pilot, I'll have ye to know,' he said, 'and any damned pea-soup that thinks I can't do it can step up right now.' So after that it was good sledding for me.

"The camp was always swept before I got there and the boys knew what hymns they wanted to sing. 'Jesus, Lover of My Soul,' is one that they liked. 'That's a damned fine tune, Pilot,' said one of them one night. 'Why don't they have tunes like that in the shows? Let's sing her again!' So we sang again, and next morning as they started out in the dark for their work they sang again:—

> "Other refuge have I none,
> Hangs my helpless soul on Thee,
> Leave, oh leave me not alone,
> Still preserve and comfort me."

"And when I heard that song coming back through all the solemn whiteness of the woods I knew where my work was, and I made up my mind that some day I would give all my time to it.

"I urged the boys to come to church when they were in town, and one day three of them did—spiked boots, mackinaw coats and all. The town was used enough to lumber jacks and river pigs, but only on the streets and in the saloons!

"'Pilot,' they said, while I was shaking hands with them, 'we just wanted to see whether you would give us as good a welcome here as we give you in camp, but I guess you have.'

"They would never come to my house until one day after the drive thirty of them showed up all at once. It was a hard squeeze getting them in, but my wife and I made them welcome, and as they stood up to go one of them handed me a slip of paper. It was a draft for $52.

"'You didn't ask us for money, Pilot,' he said, 'but we wanted you to see we liked the way you have been standing by us.' And before I could thank them they had run out of the house whooping and yelling like a lot of boys.

"After I moved to Bemidji I found I'd have to get after the saloons before I could do much more for the boys. I believe it was the worst town on the map. There were thirty-six saloons, gambling hells and worse doing business in a town of fifteen hundred persons. Finally I went round to see the keepers of the places.

"'Boys,' I said, 'I'm going to close you up. Your business is bad and you know it, but I'll have you know I'm fighting your business and not you.'

"'All right, Higgins,' they said; 'close away.'

"I spoke in my own church, in meetings of all the churches, in town meetings and finally in the very streets themselves. At last the citizens got roused and they forced the Council to close up the places.

"After it was all over I met Johnny Strong on the street.

"'I'm going away, Higgins,' he said.

"'I warned you, Johnny,' I said.

"'You did, Higgins,' he said. 'I'm going East to run a hotel and I'm going to take Mamie Blake from Breen's place with me.'

"'You'll let me marry you, Johnny?'

"'Not now, Higgins. Some day, maybe, if she stands by me. I'm going to give her a square deal. She's too good for this.'

"Strong's got a big hotel now, and Mamie's standing by him the way that kind of a woman will if the second man she loves has a spark of manhood in him. He can near make up to her for what the first one did."

The Tragedy of Dead Molly.

They are all his parishioners, apparently, the saloon keepers, the gamblers, the women of the town, as surely as the lumberjacks and the river pigs. Very simply he tells of going to the room of dead Molly, as she had asked him to do, getting out the Bible which had her "right name" written on the fly leaf, and sending it back to the mother with a letter that told nothing of Molly's life or of the dose of blue vitriol that had ended it.

Also in the line of his duty as he sees it was the long journey he made to take Pete, crushed in the fall of a mighty pine, to a hospital in St. Paul, or the second journey to help Pete when the doctors could do nothing more.

Rev. Francis E. Higgins and His Dog Team

REV. FRANCIS E HIGGINS

Photo by Freuds Studio

The Sky Pilot as the Lumberjacks Know Him

"I found him in the hospital, almost gone," he says. "'You wanted me, Pete?' I asked him.

"'I'm going, Pilot. I want you to fix it for me.'

"'But I can't fix it for you, Pete.'

"'Then why the hell did you come?'

"'To show you how you can fix it.'

"And then, just before the end, there came a faint whisper.

"'Pilot.'

"'Yes, Pete.'

"'Tell the boys I made the grade!'

"Does it pay? Of course it pays. The worst of the saloons and places are out of the lumbering towns now. The camps are lighted at night, and last year we distributed five tons of second hand reading matter among the boys and the homesteaders. We don't forget the little cabins.

"A good many of the boys give me their money in the spring and I see that it gets to their families, where it is needed. Some day perhaps I'll be able to look out for the boys on the coast and in the South, too.

"Would I rather have a city church? Well, it wouldn't take much of my preaching to close up most of them, I guess. I'd like to see more of my wife and my little girl than I do, but my place is with the boys. I understand them and they understand me. I'm going back to the real thing.

"In the city you think nothing of spending a dollar for a meal. Why, when I have to pay fifty cents for a hotel bed I have the nightmare, and if I pay more than a quarter for a meal I have indigestion. I'd never leave the woods or the work if I could help it."

That is what Higgins gets out of it—that and the appreciation the picturesqueness of his personality and the sincerity of his work have brought him. He is just Higgins, a square man.